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MAYNARD C. DRAWSON

Letter to the Editor

"NIAGARA" AND "CHINA DAM"

GHOST towns are always controversial and fascinating, and Niagara, Oregon, with its "China Dam," is no exception. The writer was bitten by this particular bug years ago, and would like to pass along some results of historical digging.

The role of the Chinese in early Oregon history, to a great extent, has been neglected by historians, although Chinese contributions to our state's development have often been most significant. Outside of one instance, I cannot recall one of these faceless Oriental pioneers being referred to as other than "Chinks, Chinamen, Celestials, Orientals, Coolies," etc. A number of our pioneer cemeteries, too, including Salem Pioneer Cemetery, list many interments simply as "Chinaman." Even the U.S. census taker simplified life when it came to Chinese names. The exception to this custom, of course, was when pioneer fruitman Seth Lewelling named the Bing cherry for his Chinese handyman, Bing.

Many geological features in Oregon, however, record their presence with such names as China Flat, China Creek, China Hat, etc. Although these hardworking alien pioneers deserve a great deal more recognition than we have given them, there is one case where they are credited with something in which they had no part: "China Dam," a stone dam on the North Santiam River between Mill City and Detroit that has enchanted visitors for over 65 years. Although correctly referred to as Niagara Dam, the legend stubbornly persists that Chinese laborers, or "coolies," built the stonework structure, hence the appellation China Dam. Actually, there are a host of misconceptions about the almost-mysterious dambuilders who endeavored to block the waters of the North Santiam so many years ago. The hamlet of Niagara, overlooking the historic spot, too, has left a very sketchy history.

Perhaps the first white man to view the huge natural rock barrier that squeezes the North Santiam into a narrow slot of boiling whitewater was the old French voyageur, Joseph Gervais. The former Hudson's Bay employee settled on a farm at French Prairie and it was his habit to spend part of the summer months east of the Cascades, crossing the mountains via the old Indian trail through the Santiam country. More certainly, however, John Minto's survey party in 1874 noticed the narrows at Niagara while searching for the elusive pass through the mountains.[1]

Later, after the pass was discovered, Col. T. Egenton Hogg's hope for a transcontinental link of rails, the Corvallis and Eastern Railroad, reached the site of Niagara in 1887. This rail line, later called the

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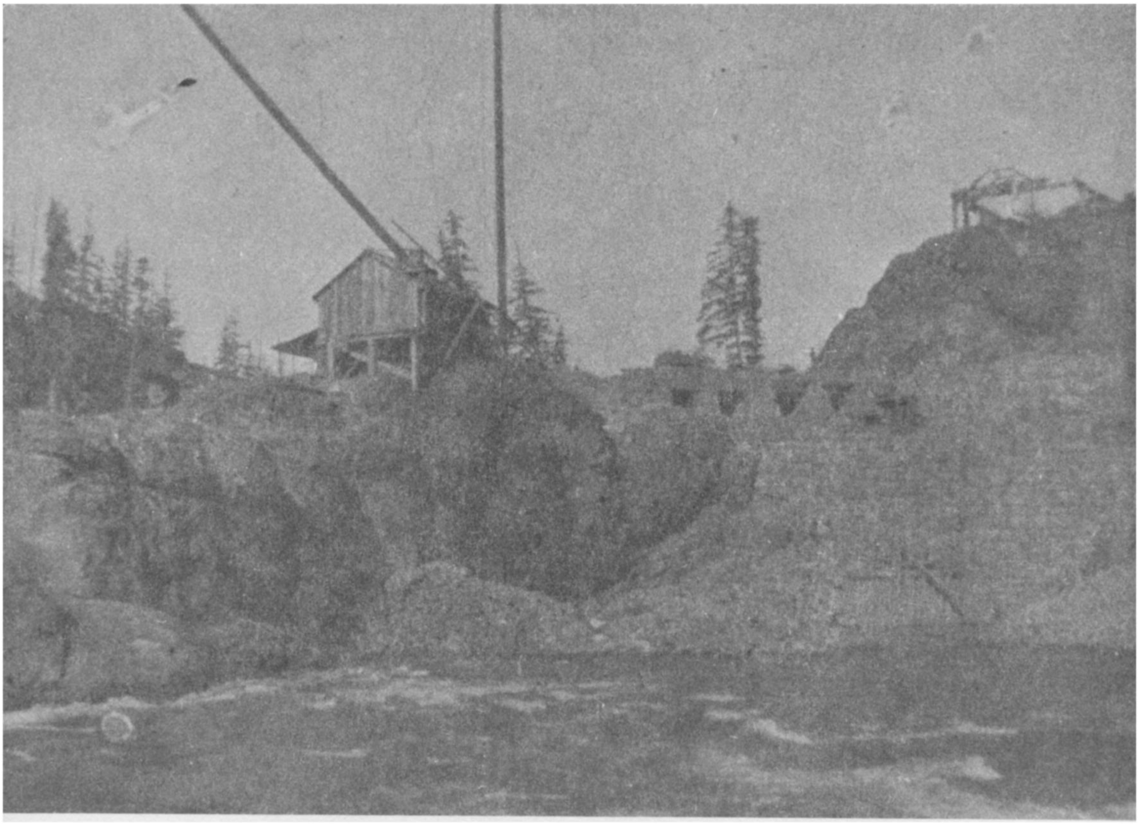
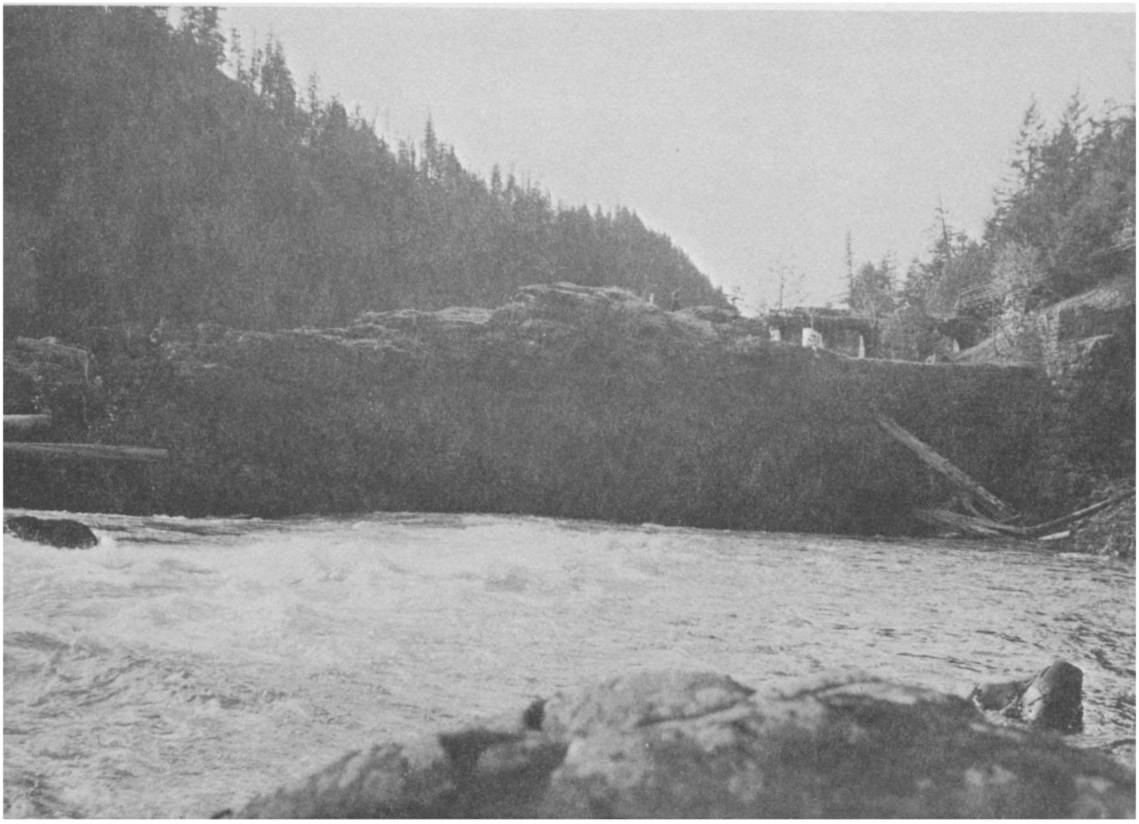
[1] See John Minto, "Minto Pass: Its History, and An Indian Tradition," *Oregon Historical Quarterly,* IV (September, 1903), 241-50.



Above view of dam, circa 1901-1903; below, later view, also from upstream looking west (1950s?); both courtesy Mid-Willamette Valley Regional Parks Agency, Salem.



Oregon Pacific, was never completed over the pass, but it was a major factor in opening up the North Santiam country to further development. Perhaps the great numbers of Chinese workers, over 1,500 of them (the present populations of Gates and Mill City combined hardly equal this total), employed by the railroad at that time gave rise to the erroneous belief that the old dam was indeed built by Chinese hands.

Interestingly enough, an example of the remarkable ability of these same Chinese with unmortared stonework still lies along the old rail line high on the Santiam Pass. The hand-hewn cuts in the solid rock and the wall-like fills of carefully laid stones are yet to be seen by travelers (if they look up) as they climb the highway circling the west face of Hogg Rock.

Soon after the coming of the railroad to the narrows of the Santiam, Niagara was born. Before 1890 Clarence Brown was operating a lumber mill there and had successfully crossed the river with a U-shaped dam of logs just above the narrows. This log structure was washed out by high water in the winter of 1896 and Job and Hamilton, then owners of the sawmill, sold their holdings to Edward and Frank O'Neil and Charles W. Callaghan.[2]

The O'Neil brothers and Callaghan, among the first of Oregon's early papermakers, started a mill near Lebanon in 1890 that made paper out of straw. They saw in Niagara a fine site for another mill and the possibility of a power dam that could generate enough power for their needs plus a marketable surplus.[3]

A crew of over 50 men began work on a rock rubble dam in September 1898. Records show that T. J. McLeary, a stonemason from Salem, was in charge of the masonry work. Work progressed slowly for three years and finally neared completion in 1901. But that winter the North Santiam, swelled by heavy rains along with melting snow, all but destroyed the efforts of the dam builders. Soft mortar and the terrific pressure of the flood waters took equal credit for failure of the dam.[4]

This setback led to renewed efforts to dam the moody river and work went on until 1903 when, due to lack of capital, the O'Neil-Callaghan combine ceased all building at Niagara. In 1910 an option was given to H. M. Byllesby and Co. (forerunners of Mountain States Power Co., now Pacific Power and Light), and preliminary engineering work for another dam was begun in 1911.[5]

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[2] See John Lengacher's compilation of Niagara history in the files of the Regional Park Agency, Salem; also testimony at a hearing before the State Hydro-electric Commission in 1931. Prior to 1930 the State Engineer was delegated the duties assumed by the SHC, which agency returned to the State Engineer's jurisdiction about 1950. So State Engineer and State Hydro-electric sources are now grouped together in the State Engineer's office in Salem. According to Chris Wheeler, State Engineer, what is left of these files is in his possession.

[3] See testimony given to the SHC in 1931; also W. Claude Adams, "History of Paper-making in the Pacific Northwest," *OHQ*, LII (March, 1951), 34.

[4] Data from personal interviews by John Lengacher at or near the dam site. On file at Regional Park Agency at Salem.

The U.S. Census of 1910 shows Niagara with a population of 21 persons, but it was undoubtedly much higher during the Byllesby era. At this time a mild land boom centered around Niagara, and in a fashion reminiscent of desert land sales in eastern Oregon a few years ago, many buyers purchased land and lots sight unseen.

But the boom busted.

In 1913, after extensive investigations by engineers, the site was judged impractical for a dam. The tongue of basaltic rock crossing the river from the south was found to be 40 feet thick but with an unsuspected underlayer of sand. In addition to the strata of sand, the north bank of the river was revealed to be 80 feet of loosely cemented gravel. (During these engineering tests, test holes were drilled through the basaltic rock and at least 80 feet of tunnel was dug into the bank of gravel.) O'Neill and Callaghan resumed some work at Niagara in the years 1913-15, but little was accomplished.[6]

Hopes for a dam in the narrow canyon were raised periodically in the years following World War I and in 1929 dam fever again gripped the area. That year O'Neil and Callaghan tendered plans to the State Hydroelectric Commission which called for a dam 121.5 feet high and 470 feet long, at a cost of over one million dollars. Preparations went so far as to have the State Game Commission advertise for an engineering firm to prepare plans for a fish ladder over the structure.[7]

That was as far as progress went. In 1947 the SHC closed out the files on this application due to lack of compliance with the requirements of the permit. In all likelihood the interest in water rights by the City of Salem at Niagara promoted the commission's action. Since that time, however, Salem has acquired additional water rights on the North Santiam near Stayton.[8]

By 1951 Detroit Dam was a reality and all hopes for a power site at Niagara had faded. As dreams of a dam melted away so did the area around Niagara. In 1953, 26 acres of tax delinquent land were set aside for a park near the old dam site. In 1961, 34 more acres were acquired by the county from the state to give the park at Niagara its present boundaries.[9]

Happily for history buffs, Marion County has taken great pains to preserve the historic site, and today it is one of the county's major scenic attractions. Niagara Park is just off Highway 22, about four miles east of Gates, which in turn is three miles east of Mill City. The park sign is small and takes a hard right off a busy highway.

History and recreation have been carefully blended at Niagara Park by the county's park experts. A large historical marker at the park entrance sums up its history:

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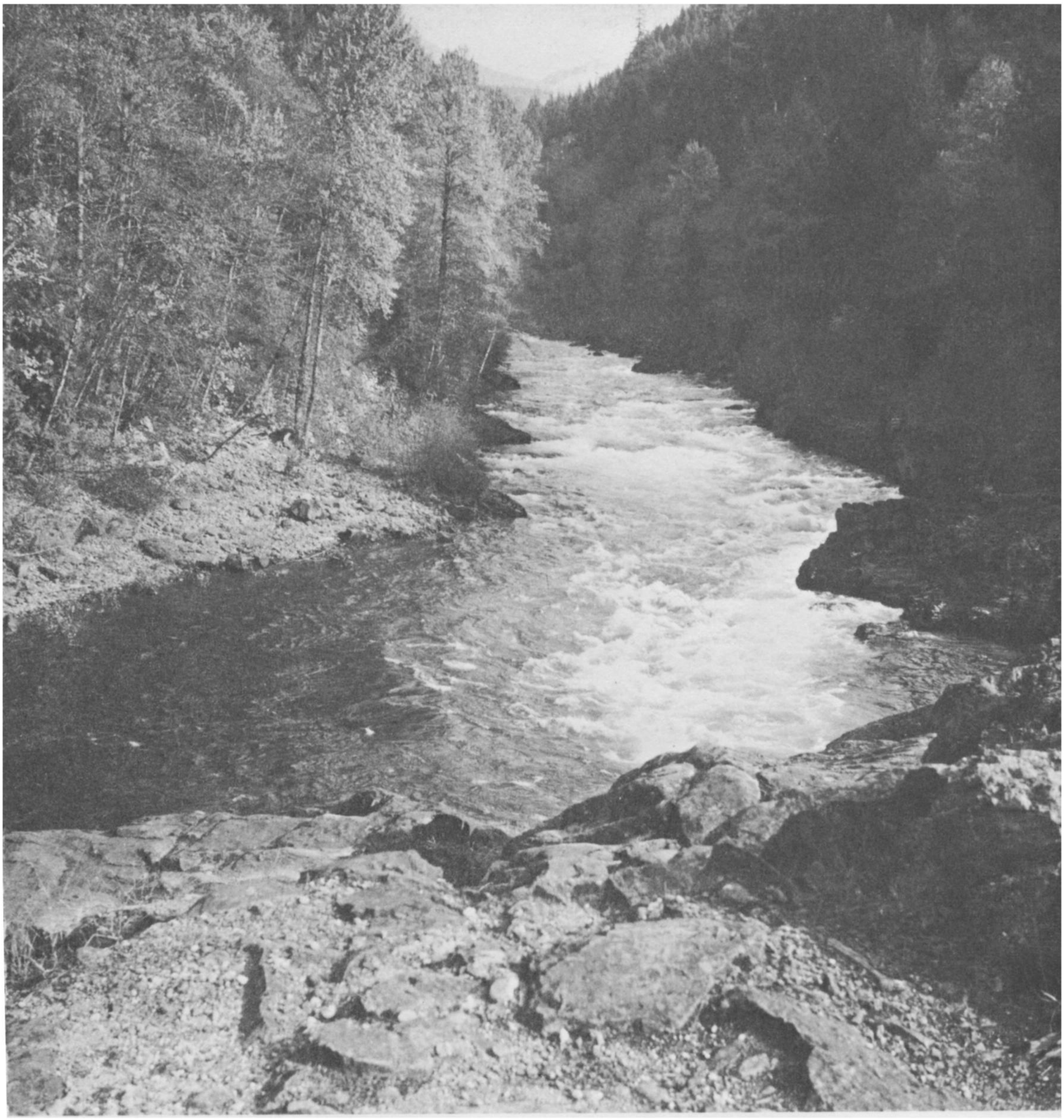
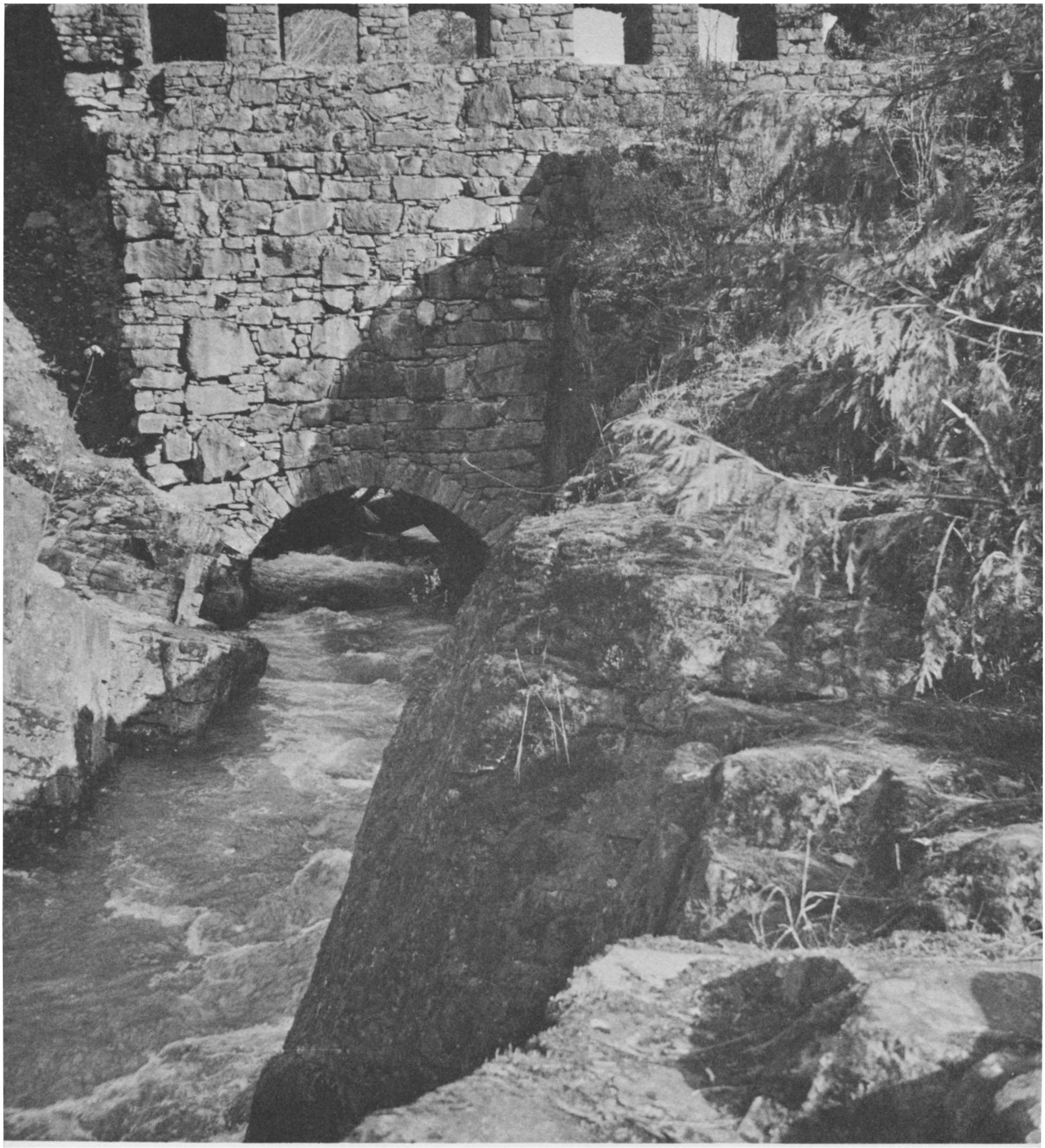
5. John Lengacher files and State Engineer files.
6. John Lengacher files and State Engineer files.
7. See old SHC files in State Engineer's office.
8. See records in Salem's Public Utility Dept., verified by its director John Geren.
9. Regional Park Agency files, Salem.



NIAGARA PARK—This area acquired its name in September 1890 when a townsite was platted to be followed by the establishment of a Post Office in October of that year. In the late 1890's a rubble masonry dam was started to develop power for a mill designed to make paper from straw. At stages in the river flow the water surged through a cleft 4′ 3″ wide. Difficulties in constructing the dam caused the paper mill project to be abandoned. Hydroelectric development continued at intervals but floods and erosion caused the project to be abandoned in 1912 after approximately 100,000 dollars had been spent. Niagara at the turn of the century had a large store, hotel, numerous dwellings and a tavern. It gained

View east from rock outcrop at damsite. (Courtesy Regional Parks Agency, Salem)



in fame at one time for the smallest Post Office in the United States, 6x8 feet. The office was discontinued June 14, 1934.

At present the remnant ramparts of the old dam are still perched atop the huge rock that blocks the path of the river and are in a good state of preservation. The old masonry is suggestive of ancient Roman or Chinese ruins, somehow out of place here on the Santiam. A closer inspection will reveal some journeyman rockwork. The expertly-placed stone forms a wall that rises 50 feet from the bottom of the power

Looking upstream below dam,
channel still unblocked.
Regional Parks Agency.

tunnel to the top of the spillways. The five spillways and arched tunnels are a lasting credit to the pioneer stonemasons who fashioned them. The huge opening of the power tunnel at the base of the spillways may be viewed from downstream but the opening on the upstream side has been filled to protect the old dam from the ravages of slides and future floods.

At one time the north bank was protected by a wing of rubble stone 50 feet high and 35 feet long. Past floods have erased all signs of this wall. A 15-foot-high wall, with a width of 6 feet, was built below the dam, running some 130 feet downstream. This wing-like wall is still in excellent shape although it has been almost 50 years since it was fashioned.

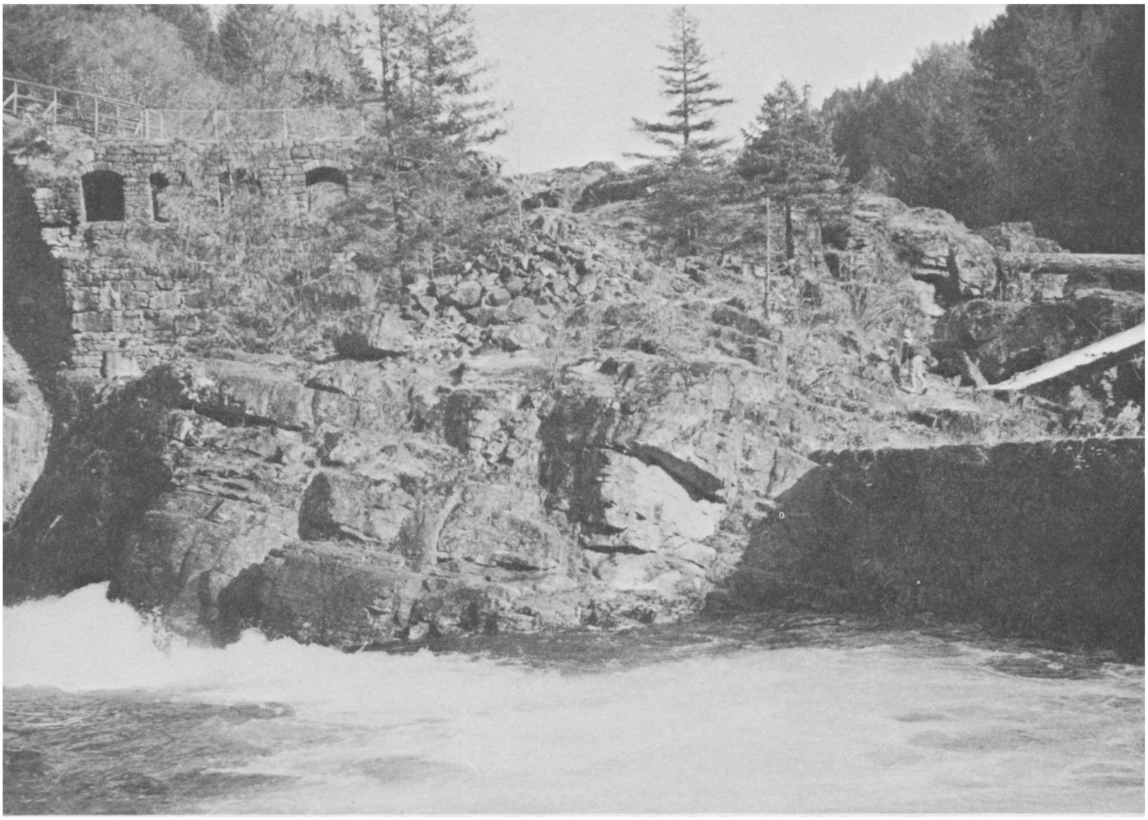
An old photograph taken in 1900 shows spar poles and booms jutting from the back of the rock across the river channel, secured by a number of wire cables running from both shores. Some of these cables may still be seen fastened to huge stumps above and below the dam. One large cable on the north side above the gorge may have actually anchored the original log dam. More than one of these old lines have been trapped in living wood by years of close contact with surrounding trees. Park officials have endeavored to preserve these cables and in one instance a tiny stone bridge rises over one of them, crossing the footpath to the picnic grounds.

In addition to the quaint stone dam, the turbulent, swirling, roaring water of the gorge offers an intriguing backdrop of wild, scenic beauty. Geologically speaking, gravel has been washed away from hard areas of lava forced out of the earth, leaving a narrow channel four feet three inches wide at the mean water line and 25 feet wide near the bottom. The river is about 45 feet deep at the narrows. Charles Gale, Marion County's former regional park director, made an emergency dive through the extremely dangerous narrows a few years ago and found the lower layer of the rock ledge to be a series of huge bowl-like depressions created by the scouring action of water and gravel. The bottom of each bowl was fairly quiet but he was hurled from each with frightening ferocity.

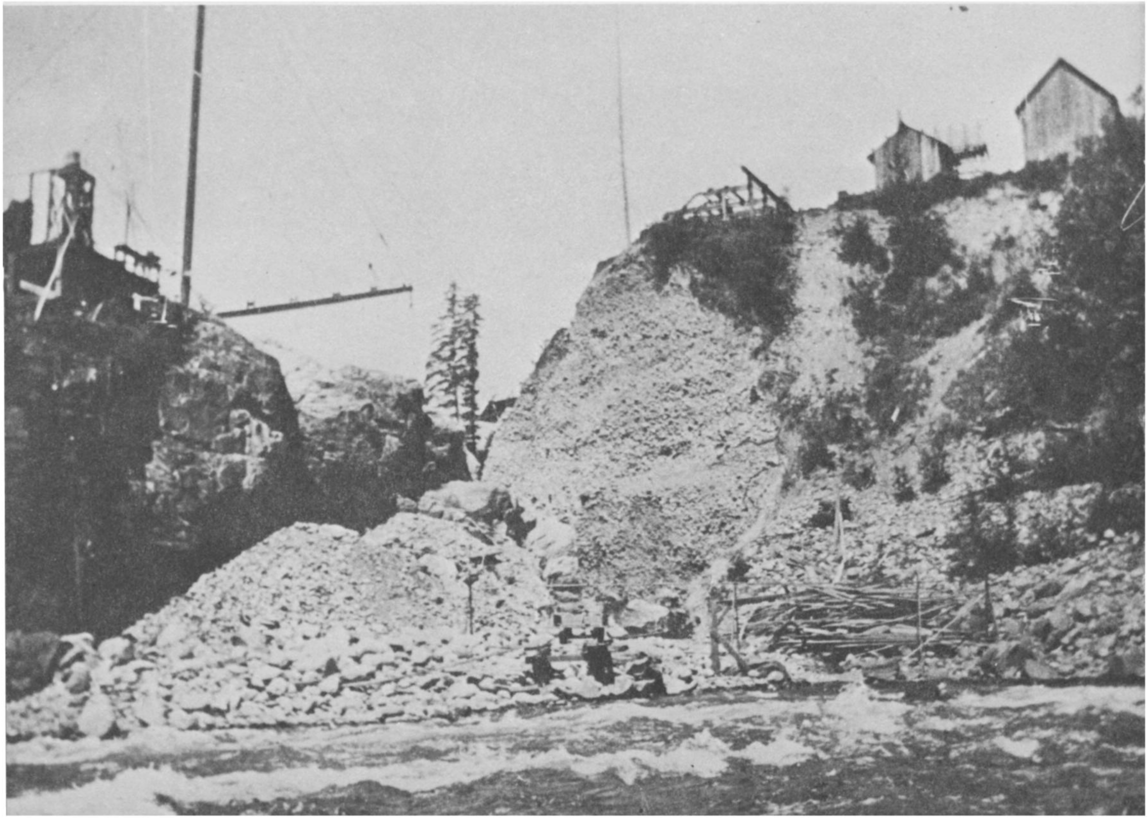
Although the history of Niagara is fairly well documented, controversy over the dam has popped up over the years and there are those along the North Santiam who abide in the belief that Chinese coolies built the old dam at Niagara. Recently, I purchased a Chinese wine jug at nearby Gates, said by the vendor to be one left behind by the dam workers. Although I don't doubt the seller's veracity, it is misinformation such as this that keeps the Chinese legend alive.

Occasionally, in the past, oldtimers have attacked these rumors, but those who remember have now all but dwindled away. One lively debate about the role of the Chinese at Niagara drew this response in the Dec. 24, 1959 issue of the Salem *Oregon Statesman:*

> I Chris Knutson, 78, worked on the Niagara Dam project during its construction. I never saw a Chinese man on or near the site.



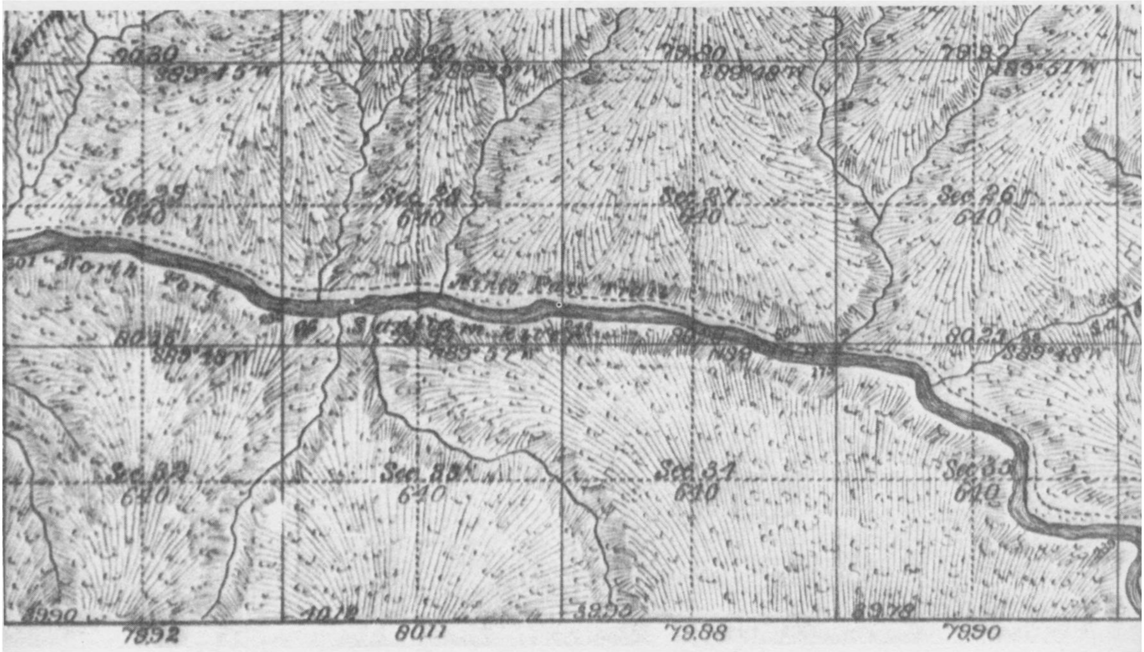
South bank below Niagara Dam shows part of 15-foot-high wall. Below shows dam in August, 1900, with booms and cables. (Regional Parks Agency, Salem)



> I, Lang Stafford [another Gates oldtimer], spent many happy days with my cousins, the McCleary boys, on the Niagara location, while our dads worked on the masonry. I never saw a Chinese man in that area. After the right-of-way and roadbed for the railroad through Gates was finished, Chinese labor was brought in to help place the ties and rails.

This was signed by Charles Knutson, Mill City, and Lang Stafford, Gates.

Even L. A. McArthur's reliable *Oregon Geographic Names* seems to be confused about Niagara. The present writer would like to add that the site was first named Brownsville (after the first mill owner), but as a post office by that name was already in use the first postmaster, William H. Burns, suggested Niagara because of the contour of the falls formed by the U-shaped log dam spanning the river at that time. *OGN* suggests that Niagara Post Office was closed in June 1894, but this is of course a misprint, for the book notes the opening of the Green Basin Post Office two miles east of Niagara (the same date as Niagara's) October 3, 1890, and mentions it was closed May 1, 1896, "with papers to Niagara." Niagara Post Office was moved to Gates in 1907, re-established 1910-18, again in 1927, and finally discontinued in 1934.[10]



Section first survey Township
9 South, Range 4 East, at BLM,
date 1881.

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[10] See Oregon Historical Society Vertical File, under Oregon—Counties—Post Offices; also Edwin R. Payne, *Oregon Post Offices* (photocopy, OHS, n.d.).